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# The Myth of the Clash of Civilizations: Confucian Values and Democratic Support

## **Abstract**

Literature on political culture claims Confucianism is incompatible with modern liberal democratic values. However, little empirical evidence has been presented to prove the validity of this statement. This paper quantitatively studies the relationship between Confucian values and democratic support in East Asian society and finds no negative correlation between the two.

## THE MYTH OF THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS: CONFUCIAN VALUES AND DEMOCRATIC SUPPORT

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**Abstract:** *Literature on political culture claims Confucianism is incompatible with modern liberal democratic values. However, little empirical evidence has been presented to prove the validity of this statement. This paper quantitatively studies the relationship between Confucian values and democratic support in East Asian society and finds no negative correlation between the two.*

### INTRODUCTION

In *Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington predicts that the post-Cold War world conflict would be a clash between western liberal democratic ideals and the eastern traditions of Confucianism and Islam. It has been taken for granted by many that Confucianism is a hindrance to democratic consolidation, and its emphasis on maintaining a hierarchical society is claimed to promote social inequality. Li (2012) argues that the role-based society that Confucianism endorses discourages individualism and represses individual spontaneity. Confucianism requires that each person behave in accordance with his or her role in society. All these Confucian ideas are found to contradict modern democratic ideologies. This leads to a question: should countries that have Confucian traditions alter their historical roots for the sake of democratization and democratic consolidation? To answer this question, one must first determine the compatibility of Confucianism and modern democratic values. Though scholars have researched this topic extensively through analysis of Confucian texts, the lack of empirical studies makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions.

This paper examines how Confucianism directly and indirectly influences support for democracy at the individual level and finds no negative correlation between the two, as Huntington had predicted. Confucianism is deconstructed into Elitism, Familism, Preference for Harmony, and Respect for Authority. Their corresponding effects on individuals' support for democracy are explored. This research does not merely examine the Confucian texts alone, but rather focuses on the Confucian principles that are practiced by the society. It tries to provide a new interpretation of the role Confucianism plays in the development of political culture in modern and post-modern East Asian society.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The prevailing assumption, articulated by Huntington in his *Clash of the Civilizations*, is that Confucian thought is inherently anti-democratic. He believes that maintaining order and respecting hierarchy constitute the central tenets of Confucianism, and that these ideas repress the development of individualism. Other researchers, including Chenyang Li, question the compatibility of democracy and Confucianism as well. Li argues that Confucianism embraces both numerical and proportional

equality. Numerical equality indicates that all human beings are endowed with the same capacity for moral cultivation.<sup>144</sup> Moral equality does not imply that all people have the same status; rather, it dictates that people with the same roles, such as fathers and husbands, are given the same kind of responsibilities and entitlements. Li calls such equality “role based numerical equality.”<sup>145</sup>

Proportional equality, or “equality relative to people’s due,” is another fundamental principle in Confucianism. According to this notion, some form of division of labor based on social stratification is necessary. Confucianism promotes the concept of *xian*, which means virtuous and talented. A person with such qualities must be well educated and equipped with superb moral achievement, consequently deserving high status in society.<sup>146</sup> Though advocating that everyone should have equal opportunities to be educated, Confucianism recognizes that only *xian* people could bear the responsibility of managing a state. Li also argues that with Confucian proportional equality comes political inequalities that contradict the fundamental values underlying modern democracy.<sup>147</sup> Based on this analysis, political Confucianism is theoretically incompatible with modern notions of political equality.

Other scholars have a more positive attitude towards the compatibility between Confucianism and democratic ideals. Fukuyama argues that Confucianism is relatively tolerant and has potential egalitarian implications, in that everyone is entitled to receive equal opportunity to cultivate himself or herself into a virtuous being.<sup>148</sup> Chen also argues that Confucian values are compatible with modern liberal democracy. She claims the Confucian practices of “personal cultivation...and the moral responsibility of the holders of power” can prevent the tendency of over-materialization of modern society.<sup>149</sup> In addition, He summarizes four ideal-type models of the relationship between Confucianism and democracy: conflict, compatible, hybrid, and critical.<sup>150</sup> He notes in the conflict model that Confucianism lacks the concept of negative liberty, which is the freedom to act free of exterior interferences. But he also argues that the conflict model overstates the negative role of Confucianism and overlooks the possibility of compatibility, consequently downplaying the likelihood of a Confucian contribution to democratization. However, he admits that empirically, the conflict model was much more accurate than the compatibility model in the early stages of democratization in East Asia.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Li 2012, 297

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 299

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 306

<sup>147</sup> Li 2012, 308

<sup>148</sup> Fukuyama 1995, 25

<sup>149</sup> Chen 2007, 211

<sup>150</sup> He 2010, 19

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 30

Some scholars have conducted empirical research on Confucianism as well as on political culture in East Asian countries. In *Democratization in Confucian East Asia*, Zhengxu Wang (2007) argues that citizens with stronger self-expression values are more likely to be critical citizens. He shows that economic development and social modernization in Confucian Asia results in stronger self-expression values which in turn give rise to democratic citizenship in these societies. Wang does not examine how self-expression tendencies are correlated with Confucianism, but he does raise the important concept of self-expression values, which have played a non-negligible role in shaping civic culture in Confucian societies. Another empirical study done by Qi (2008) finds that Confucian values are negatively correlated with democratic support. However, this study did not unravel the mechanism through which such negative effects took place. Moreover, this study did not deconstruct Confucianism and investigate which doctrine or concept specifically undermined democratic support.

At this point, no research has been done to depict the exact mechanism through which Confucian thought affects support for democracy at the individual level. This study aims to empirically test this correlation as well as the mechanism through which Confucianism can indirectly affect individuals' support for democracy.

#### RESEARCH DESIGN

This research employs a large-N statistical model using data from the Asian Barometer (AB) Wave 2 conducted between 2004 and 2008. The analysis presented in this paper is from a set of structural equation models (SEM) employing Maximum Likelihood. Variables are first set up in an assumed causal sequence, with each variable being regressed on all variables that precede it in the chain. A path model enables the test of direct correlations between a particular Confucian value and individuals' support for democracy. It examines correlations suggested by existing political culture theories--such as the social capital theory--that can indirectly affect democratic support. This model requires the deconstruction of Confucianism into measurable variables. Confucianism covers a broad range of topics, such as humanity, morality, governance, and etiquette. This study is based on the theoretical framework raised by Weiming Tu, which divides the ideology into two categories: political Confucianism and Confucian personal ethics.

In order to measure Confucianism, one needs first to define every variable in the model. Elitism is one of the most prominent doctrines in Confucianism. Bell describes elitism as the "rule of the wise;" it exemplifies the ideal that "the best and the brightest" should exert more influence in order to build a good society.<sup>152</sup> Confucius claims: "In government, the secret is Integrity. Use it, and you'll be like the polestar: always dwelling in its proper place the other stars turning reverently about

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<sup>152</sup> Bell 2006, 157

it.”<sup>153</sup> This statement shows that political Confucianism values the virtues of a ruler. The ruler shall establish himself as a moral exemplar and shall be well educated. Moreover, by likening an ideal ruler to a “polestar,” Confucius affirms his belief in the centrality of the role rulers perform in state management.

Confucianism is also governed by a fundamental principle of harmony. In the political realm, Confucianism means a well-rounded sociopolitical order governed by *li*, which involves “the behavior of persons related to each other in terms of role, status, rank, and position within a structured society.”<sup>154</sup> Such a strong tendency towards conformity is characterized as one form of Preference for Harmony. Another aspect that exemplifies this characteristic is Confucian personal ethics, which advocates litigation avoidance in solving private disputes. As recorded in *The Analects*: “I can hear a court case as well as anyone. But we need to make a world where there’s no reason for a court case.”<sup>155</sup> Confucianism claims that if everyone in society has courtesy and treats others in a benevolent and altruistic manner, then harmony can be maintained and no dispute will take place.

The Confucian personal ethic states that it is necessary to obey family elders, whose decisions should be followed and respected. It also stresses that one’s personal behavior must honor the ancestors. These claims are conceptualized as *Familism* in this study. Confucian personal ethic encourages a harmonious and cooperative society by stipulating strict moral codes regarding respect that must be performed among people with different hierarchical status. Moreover, two notions of self are clearly differentiated in the Confucian tradition: the small self and the great self. The small self is the limited self. It operates as a force of inertia that resists further development. The great self, on the other hand, goes beyond self-centeredness. It not only relates to the family, the society, the state, and beyond to the world at large, but also establishes these relationships as “part of its own sensitivity and concern.”<sup>156</sup> In other words, familism embodies a certain degree of self-sacrifice when conflicts rise between personal and family interests.

The Confucian ideology also promotes a role-based society, where everyone has his or her own entitlements and responsibilities, according to which each individual acquires his or her due equality. Confucius specifies five relationships: rulers and subjects, fathers and sons, husbands and wives, elder and younger brothers, and finally friends and friends. He maintains that if individuals observe these relationships properly, the society will stabilize itself. This observation of social hierarchy is conceptualized as Respect for Authority.

When studying the correlation between political culture and democracy, it is worth examining the social capital theory, which integrates sociology and economics to study civic tradition as well as

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<sup>153</sup> Confucius 1998, 11

<sup>154</sup> Schwartz 1985, 67

<sup>155</sup> Confucius and Hinton 1998, 132

<sup>156</sup> Tu

political dynamics. In other words, besides direct correlations, Confucian values may affect democratic support at the individual level through other mechanisms suggested by literature on political culture. Social capital theorists have shown that social trust and democratic consolidation are positively correlated.<sup>157</sup> Inglehart argues that social trust is essential for people to view political opponents as a loyal opposition and is strongly correlated with stable democracy.<sup>158</sup> Coleman (1988) contends that a system of mutual trust is an important form of social capital through which future obligations and expectations may be based. Regarding social trust, Putman draws a distinction between “thick trust,” which is “embedded in personal relations,” and “thin trust,” which extends to other people within the community. Though this dichotomy has been criticized for failing to characterize the complexity of social trust in the real world, it is especially appropriate for studies East Asian countries. Qi argues that Confucian personal ethics encourage people to “pursue interests and seek social exchanges” within “in-groups”<sup>159</sup> where the “thick trust” applies. She also finds that, in countries influenced by Confucianism, such particular trust is negatively correlated with general interpersonal trust in society.<sup>160</sup> Therefore, this study will also incorporate General Trust as an intervening variable to test whether Confucian values indirectly influence democratic support by altering social capital.

Another concept raised by Inglehart is the postmaterialist value, which embodies tolerance, quality of life, self-expression, intellectual and aesthetic needs, etc.<sup>161</sup> He finds that postmaterialist values contribute to people’s declining confidence in hierarchical institutions, which in turn strengthen their support for democracy.<sup>162</sup> This theory has been confirmed in Wang’s study on democratization in Confucian East Asian countries. Based on this study, I incorporated Self-Expression values as another intervening variable. By influencing this variable, Confucian values could possibly have an indirect impact on individuals’ support for democracy. In measuring self-expression values, I extracted the elements comparatively relevant to democratic support. Individuals’ interest in and willingness to participate in politics is used as an indicator of the level of self-expression values; individuals’ potential for civil disobedience is another. John Rawls defines civil disobedience as “politically-motivated, public, non-violent and conscientious breach of law undertaken with the aim of bringing about a change in laws or government policies.”<sup>163</sup> Civil disobedience is a call to conscience when no other means of self-expression is found adequate or

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<sup>157</sup> Inglehart 1997; Putnam 1993 and 2000; Fukuyama 1995; Newton 2001

<sup>158</sup> Inglehart 1997, 172-173

<sup>159</sup> Qi 2008, 9

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 17-19

<sup>161</sup> Inglehart 1997, 109-130

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 299

<sup>163</sup> Rawls, 1971

satisfactory. Therefore, the level of one's potential for civil disobedience reflects one's aspiration for liberty and inclination to act in self-defense through public expression.

Democracy is a concept that resists attempts to objectively define. Schmitter and Karl recapitulate nine "procedural minimum" conditions for democracy,<sup>164</sup> while Whitehead argues that all definitions of democracy are contextually based.<sup>165</sup> However, regardless of the definitions of democracy, there is a consensus on the liberal political ideal that laid the foundation of democracy. The ideal of liberty claims that all men are born equal, and as a result, they all have natural rights to life, to property, and to civil freedoms of association. All individuals are equally entitled to exercise the rights listed above, irrespective of their sex, race, religion, or political views. As implied by liberal democratic ideals, political equality is a prerequisite for modern democracy. Though unequal distribution of political resources poses the question of whether political equality can be realized or not, the goal of political equality still has its intrinsic merits.<sup>166</sup> On the surface, the Confucian idea of proportional equality, which implies that virtuous people should run the government, conflicts with the modern ideal of political equality. Proportional equality resembles Dahl's concept of guardianship, which states that only qualified elites can govern for the common good.<sup>167</sup> Dahl argues that guardians who make moral judgments based on the "science of ruling" and the knowledge of the general good misunderstand the relationship between private and collective interests. Individuals who give consent to guardianship based on economic performance are regarded as having lower levels of democratic support.

I synthesized the literature on Confucianism and incorporated social capital and post-materialist theory to hypothesize a path model that depicts the mechanism by which Confucianism generates impact on democratic support at the individual level. The final model of the correlation between Confucian values and support for democracy in East Asia will be obtained by dropping all the paths that show insignificant correlations. The selection of countries covers China, South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. The reason I chose these cases is because my study is confined to East Asian countries. All these countries or regions either have had Confucianism as their official religion, such as South Korea and Japan, or are occupied by population that is culturally rooted in Confucianism, such as Hong Kong and Taiwan.<sup>168</sup>

The hypotheses I proposed are outlined in Table 1 below. Elitism, Respect for Authority, Familism, and Preference for Harmony are exogenous variables, and the covariances between the variables are represented by two-ended arrows. Causal relations between variables are represented by

<sup>164</sup> Schmitter and Karl, 1991, 81-82

<sup>165</sup> Whitehead 2002, 26

<sup>166</sup> Dahl 2006, 36 and 84

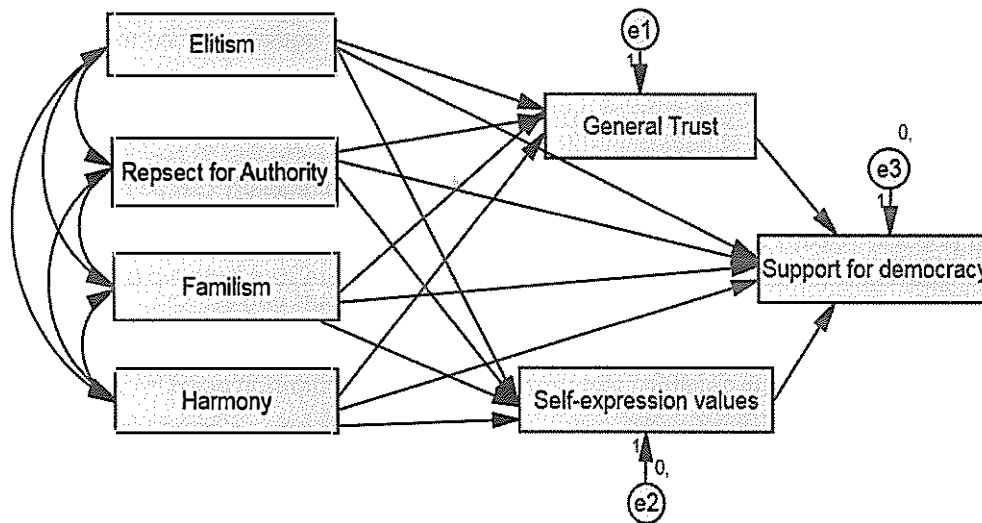
<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 53

<sup>168</sup> Lew, Wang and Choi, 2001; Nosco, 1997



unidirectional arrows. The unexplained effects are represented by error 1, 2 and 3. In this model, direct correlations between every single Confucian value and support for democracy are assumed. Further, direct correlations between Confucian values and General Trust as well as Self-Expression Values are also represented. The total effect that Confucianism has on democratic support is thus calculated by adding up the direct and indirect effects.

**Figure 1:** Hypotheses



## MEASUREMENT AND OPERATIONALIZATION

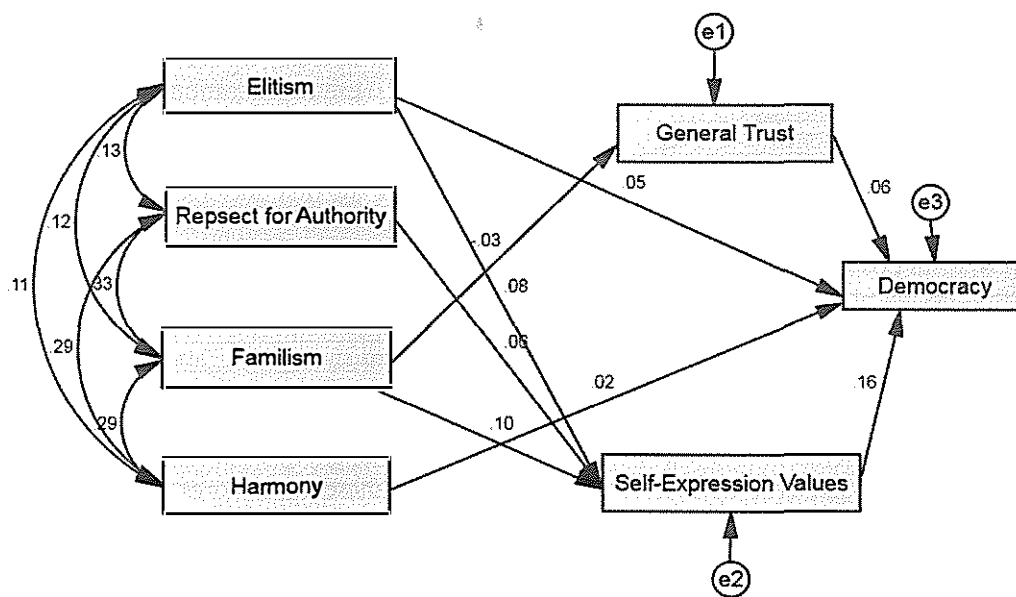
**Table 1:** Measurement of Variables

Variable	Measurement	Description
Elitism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“We should get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader decide things.”</li> <li>“People with little or no education should have as much say in politics as highly-educated people.”</li> </ul>	For both statements, respondents choosing “strongly disagree/disapprove” were coded as 1, “disagree/disapprove” as 2, “agree/approve” as 3, and “strongly agree/approve” as 4. The sum score stands for the level of elitism. The higher the score, the higher the level of elitism.
Respect for Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Being a student, one should not question the authority of their teacher.”</li> <li>“Government leaders are like the head of a family; we should all follow their decisions.”</li> </ul>	Same as above. The higher the score, the higher the level of respect for authority.
Familism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“For the sake of the family, the individual should put his personal interests second.”</li> <li>“Even if parents' demands are unreasonable, children still should do what they ask.”</li> </ul>	Same as above.

Preference for Harmony	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “When one has a conflict with a neighbor, the best way to deal with it is to accommodate the other person.”</li> <li>• “If people have too many different ways of thinking, society will be chaotic.”</li> </ul>	Same as above.
Out-group trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Generally speaking, would you say most people can be trusted or that you must be very careful in dealing with people?”</li> <li>• “How much trust do you have in other people you interact with?”</li> </ul>	For the first question, “you must be very careful in dealing with people” was coded as 1, “most people can be trusted” as 2. For the second question, “none at all” was coded as 1, “not very much trust” as 2, “quite a lot trust” as 3, and “a great deal of trust” as 4. The sum score of these two questions indicates the level of out-group trust.
Self-Expression Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “How interested would you say you are in politics?”</li> <li>• “If possible, I don't want to get involved in political matters.”</li> <li>• “Citizens should always obey laws and regulations, even if they disagree with them.”</li> </ul>	For the first question, “not at all interested” was coded as 1, “not very interested” as 2, “somewhat interested” as 3, and “very interested” as 4. For the second and third statements, “strongly agree” was coded as 1, “somewhat agree” as 2, “somewhat disagree” as 3, and “strongly disagree” as 4. The sum of these three scores stands for the level of self-expression values.
Support for democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “If you had to choose between democracy and economic development, which would you say is more important?”</li> <li>• “Which of the following statements comes closest to your own opinion?”</li> </ul>	For the first question, “economic development is definitely more important” was coded as 1, “somewhat more important” as 2, “equally important” as 3, “democracy is somewhat more important” as 4, and “democracy is definitely more important” as 5. For the second question, “it does not matter whether we have a democracy or not” was coded as 1, “under some circumstances, an authoritarian government can be preferable” as 2, and “democracy is always preferable” as 3. The sum score of these two questions indicates level of support for democracy.

A reduced model, which shows the correlations between variables, was produced by dropping all the insignificant paths in the original one. The path coefficients are shown above each arrow. The RMSEA is .017, which is smaller than the .05 required for a good model. Therefore, the goodness of fit measure supports the adequacy of this model. The Chi-square is not used here to test the adequacy of this model. First, the finding of significance in the likelihood ratio test of a path model can occur even with very small differences of the model-implied and observed covariance metrics, especially given the large-N of the samples in this study, which is 9,813. Moreover, since Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) tends to inflate Chi-square, RMSEA, an indicator less influenced by sample size is used to measure the goodness of fit of this model.

**Figure 2: Reduced Model**



Note: Comparative fit index = 0.986; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.017; 99 percent confidence interval for RMSEA = 0.011-0.024; N=9813, Chi-square=28,  $p < 0.0001$ .

**Table 2: Total Effects of Confucian Values on Democratic Attitudes**

	Elitism	Authority	Familism	Self-Expression	Harmony	Trust
Self-Expression	.079	.056	.095	.000	.000	.000
Trust	.000	.000	-.029	.000	.000	.000
Democracy	.065	.009	.014	.162	.020	.061

In the model, no direct correlation is found between Respect for Authority, Familism and Support for Democracy. Familism is found to be negatively correlated with General Trust, which confirms Qi's finding that interpersonal trust in East Asian countries tends to undermine general social trust. This model also confirms the social capital theory, which states that social trust promotes

democratic governance. The model does not find any direct negative correlation between the four sets of Confucian values and Self-Expression Values. On the contrary, Elitism, Familism and Respect for Authority are found to contribute to Self-Expression Values. In this model, Preference for Harmony neither contributes to nor undermines General Trust or Self-Expression Values, but exhibits a positive correlation with Support for Democracy. The total effects are calculated by adding the direct effects, association of one variable with another free from other intervening paths, and indirect effects, association of one variable with another mediated through other variables in the model. As shown in Table 2, the net effects the four values have on democratic support are all positive according to this model, with Self-Expression Values affecting Support for Democracy most significantly.

Familism undermines Support for Democracy by reducing out-group trust, but the net effect of Familism on Support for Democracy is nonetheless positive. Furthermore, none of the four sets of Confucian values are found, directly or indirectly, to undermine democratic support at the individual level.

### CONCLUSIONS

No negative correlation between Confucian values and democratic support is found in this study. On the contrary, a positive correlation, negligible as it is, is presented in the model. Therefore, this study does not support the claim made in the *Clash of Civilizations* stating that a major conflict exists between Confucian values and democracy. With the small path coefficients, this study neither supports the claim that Confucian values could positively contribute to individuals' democratic support. However, this study refutes cultural arguments against Confucianism regarding democratization or democratic consolidation.

The constitutional liberties in modern democratic countries, such as freedom of speech and religion, belong to negative liberty, which designates rights that can be exercised free from interference. However, the correlativity of rights and duties dictates that rights and duties are just two sides of a same concept. Confucianism rarely stipulates positive duties people have towards one another; rather, it mostly enumerates negative duties, which are actions people shall refrain from doing for the benefit of others. To say A has a duty not to act in a certain way towards B is the same as saying that B has a right over A's not acting in that way. *The Analects* says, "Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself."<sup>169</sup> If each individual in the society attaches significant importance to self-autonomy, then everyone else has a duty not to interfere with this preference as long as it does not do harm to others. Culture is not stagnant, but rather constantly

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<sup>169</sup> Confucius 1998, 176

evolving and opening to new interpretation. Confucianism, it appears, is flexible enough to accommodate new perspectives.

One cannot simply conclude a particular culture is pro-authoritarian or will foster the growth of democratic ideas. Empirically, no evidence is found that Confucianism is incompatible with democratic support. Future research should focus on whether institutions established based on Confucian values or practices inherited from Confucian traditions have played a role in hindering democratization or democratic consolidation.

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## APPENDICES

## Regression Weights

		Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
Trust	<--- Familism	-.011	.004	-2.584	.010
Self-Expression	<--- Familism	.093	.012	7.481	***
Self-Expression	<--- Authority	.073	.017	4.287	***
Self-Expression	<--- Elitism	.229	.038	6.018	***
Democracy	<--- Trust	.113	.023	4.950	***
Democracy	<--- Self-Expression	.117	.010	12.223	***
Democracy	<--- Harmony	.022	.013	1.669	.095
Democracy	<--- Elitism	.109	.025	4.323	***

\*\*\*p&lt;0.0001

## Standardized Regression Weights

	Estimate
Trust <--- Familism	-.029
Self-Expression <--- Familism	.095
Self-Expression <--- Authority	.056
Self-Expression <--- Elitism	.079
Democracy <--- Trust	.061
Democracy <--- Self-Expression	.162
Democracy <--- Harmony	.020
Democracy <--- Elitism	.052

## Covariances

	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
Authority <--> Elitism	.179	.017	10.671	***
Familism <--> Authority	1.319	.048	27.563	***
Familism <--> Elitism	.210	.021	10.166	***
Harmony <--> Authority	.746	.031	24.172	***
Harmony <--> Familism	.984	.038	26.016	***
Harmony <--> Elitism	.126	.013	9.497	***

## Squared Multiple Correlations

	Estimate
Self-Expression	.025
Trust	.001
Democracy	.035